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ABSTRACT

Since communication is the working link between the school district and the community it serves, public school administrators serving small towns or rural areas are developing a planned program of two-way communication based on a clear policy statement adopted by the board of trustees which basically upholds the public's right to know. In order to make the policy work, the district's communications goals must be translated into guidelines. The communication program designed to meet these goals should include a plan for circulating information within the schools, activities involving community groups, and how to meet the needs of any news media in the area. Some methods school administrators in both small and large school districts have found effective in their communities are face-to-face sessions, advisory groups, volunteers, audiovisual materials, annual reports, mail stuffers, bulletin boards, student pages, and district and education service center newsletters. School administrators may also find help by visiting the newspaper editors, radio and television news directors in the area, the journalism faculty members or information officers from nearby colleges or universities, and the education service centers. A planned evaluation of the district's developing communications program will pinpoint areas needing more intensive work. This handbook presents a format for communication workshops keyed to the special needs of small schools (ADA 500 or less) and provides materials which may be used as workshop handouts and district reference materials. (NQ)

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# COMMUNICATION: A PLAN FOR SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

**COUNCIL OF COMMUNICATORS OF THE REGIONAL EDUCATION SERVICE CENTERS**

**in cooperation with**

**DIVISION OF DISSEMINATION**
**TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY**

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**Austin, Texas** **July, 1977**

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COUNCIL MEMBERS

This handbook is for you. It was developed to help you work with small districts in your region and to provide materials which you may share with them. The new Principles, Standards, and Procedures for Accreditation of Elementary and Secondary Schools places considerable emphasis on community involvement in setting goals for the school districts. The materials in this handbook and the many suggestions by your writing committee will help you help school districts develop their community-based programs.

# THE LINK BETWEEN
# SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

## Introduction

Communication -- planned or accidental -- is the working link between the school district and the community it serves. In many cases, however, schools which serve small towns or rural areas make little effort to plan and carry out a truly organized effort to improve the exchange of information and ideas. The reason is simple: communication among neighbors is taken for granted.

Much of the time and in many communities school people may be able to live with this informal non-arrangement. Basically, however, a take-it-for-granted kind of communication ignores one of the facts of daily living. Most people won't get your message unless you send it out to them accurately and clearly.

This handbook was designed to help the regional education service centers work with small school districts in order to open and expand lines of communication.

Compiled by the Council of Communicators of the regional centers in cooperation with the Division of Dissemination of the Texas Education Agency, it offers two approaches to the problem:

First, it presents a format for communication workshops keyed to the special needs of small schools (ADA 500 or less).

Second, it provides the materials -- Communications Program -- which may be extracted from this handbook and reproduced in volume as workshop handouts and district reference materials.

Communications Workshop

Step One -- Begin with an activity designed to help participants become aware of the variety of different audiences who receive their messages -- even in a relatively small community. Follow this with a discussion of the different means and or media used to transmit these messages. Now, combine these two lists into a large chalk-board matrix which, when completed, will show exactly how the communications are -- or are not -- reaching their intended audiences. The sample below will help you get this brainstorming activity underway.

| Media | Parents | Staff | Civic Clubs | Churches | Students | Minority Citizens | Farm Organization |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Weekly Newspaper | | | | | | | |
| Area Daily Newspaper | | | | | | | |
| Local Radio Stations | | | | | | | |
| Area TV Stations | | | | | | | |
| Newsletters | | | | | | | |
| Slide-Tapes | | | | | | | |
| Coffee Sessions | | | | | | | |

Next, pinpoint some of the indicators which may point up some previously unseen problems within the district. The potential list may seem almost infinite at times. . . .particularly when you begin asking questions such as those in this short sample:

Have you had a bond issue fail?

Are there increasing objections to the tax structure?

Is there increasing indication of building vandalism?

Do patrons reject new curriculum ideas?

Is PTA meeting attendance dropping?

. . . .And so on.

Step Two -- Ready for a change of pace? This may be a good time to turn the group's thinking toward more philosophical lines with a discussion of the underlying purposes of public relations. The National School Public Relations Association defines the educational public relations program this way:

"A planned and systematic two-way process of communication between the educational organization and its internal and external publics."

Every word counts and every word can be a takeoff point for discussion. By the time you lead the group through "planned," "systematic," "two-way," etc., everyone will have a better idea of the process and what it can mean to the school district, no matter where it is located or how few children it serves.

This discussion will not only help you and your workshop participants come to both philosophical and verbal grip with the public relations idea. . . it will get everyone in the room involved. Now, you can lead the group one step past involvement -- to commitment. This commitment is expressed by a school district through a Board of Trustees policy statement which should include: (1) Statement of desire to begin a program, and (2) Procedure for

designing an action plan. (At this point, you may want to share examples of policy statements, Appendix A, with your group. These examples may help them develop their own policies to meet their own needs.)

Step Three -- Develop a comprehensive program, at least in outline form, which the participants can take home and put into action in their districts. Key points will probably include:

(1) Purpose of the program. Example: Stimulate a better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the district.

(2) Management function. Example: Interpret public attitudes; identify school policies and procedures with other public interests.

(3) Action plan. Develop ways to bring the citizens into the district as both formal and informal advisors. Set out to earn public understanding and acceptance, both internally and externally.

Step Four -- Review workshop activities; make sure you are accomplishing its objectives. Hand out materials. At the same time, you may want to reiterate where schools can go for help (to you?) in setting up their communications program.

Note: The following section, "A School Communications Program," is designed to serve two purposes: (1) Provide an information base for planning each regional education service center workshop for small school districts, and (2) Provide handout material which you may want to reprint and distribute at the end of the workshop in order to give participants readily available reference material. All of this material or any part of it may be reproduced for your participants.

# A SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAM

## Plan With A Purpose

Public school administrators, increasingly aware of the many publics they serve, are turning a sensitive ear to comment, questions, and criticism both from the campus and the community. They are taking more time to discuss their hopes, plans, and programs. They are, in fact, developing a planned program of two-way communication based on a clear policy statement adopted by the board of trustees. (See Appendix A for examples.)

This statement, when carefully thought out by the board members, will give shape and direction to your communications effort. Basically, it should uphold the public's right to know. There will be exceptions to this right, of course. These exceptions will include personnel files, board discussions related to personnel matters, and advance information -- such as land purchases -- which could give financial benefit if known in advance.

The policy statement might also affirm the trustees' desire to respond fully to citizen expression, thus calling upon the district staff to become increasingly aware of public opinion.

Although this policy of full and open communication may sometimes result in misuse or misquotation, these incidents are usually unintentional. The benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. Open communication is, in short, a practical expression of our democratic system.

This general statement of policy will make your goals quite clear. Unfortunately, however, it won't bring their achievement any closer. At this point, you are ready for the next step. In order to make the policy work, it

will be necessary to translate your district communications goals into guidelines. You might find these steps helpful.

(1) Designate one member of your professional staff to ramrod the effort. (This may be a part-time rather than full-time assignment in small districts.)

(2) Assess your district needs. Gather the opinions of other staff members and citizens of the community concerning both the total school operation and individual programs within the schools.

(3) Design a communications plan to meet these needs. This should probably include a plan for circulating information within the schools, activities involving community groups, and how to meet the needs of any news media in your area including local radio stations, weekly newspapers, and daily newspapers and television stations which may be located in larger cities but do serve your citizens.

## "Publics" Are Plural, Plural, Plural

Every school district has its own list of "publics" or groups of people who look and listen at and to you from their special points of view. You may divide these people into age groups, economic groups, ethnic groups, special interest groups, or any number and cut of sub-groups. The list is almost endless and frequently over-lapping. Here are a few examples:

| Internal Publics | External Publics |
|---|---|
| Professional staff | Parents |
| Students | Other citizens |
| Support staff | Civic clubs |
| Paraprofessional staff | Churches |
| Board of Trustees | Business firms |
| Local units of teacher associations | News media |

All these publics -- and others -- must know what you are doing now and what you plan to do in the future. They want and need to understand your views on every issue concerning their schools and their children. This is, in the final analysis, the only basis they will have for supporting your programs.

At the same time, it is important for the school administrator to understand what his or her publics actually know about a given situation in contrast to what they need to know. The gap between the two is surprisingly wide. . . .most of the time.

They won't know what you need and want to improve their schools -- unless you tell them as completely as possible. And you won't know what they want for their children -- unless you listen as closely as possible.

## Ideas That Work

There are many ways of using words -- and a good communicator uses all of them -- to get the message across. Here are a few methods school administrators in both small and large school districts have found effective in their communities.

Face-to-Face -- This personal method can probably do more for a district than any other single effort. In fact, the idea is so natural we take it for granted and fail to make the most of every opportunity. A little planning, even in the small school, will help expand communication opportunities through informal coffee sessions with parents to the more formal staff meetings.

Advisory Groups -- One or more good advisory groups organized for specific purposes and kept busy working toward them will ask a variety of questions about schools. . . .and come up with some surprisingly effective answers.

Volunteers -- Parents, retired teachers, and other citizens with special talents can give invaluable help. . . .if they are kept busy at tasks they do well.

Audiovisual Materials -- Filmstrips, slide-tapes, transparencies for the overhead projector, and 16mm motion picture presentations are perhaps the most widely used AV materials in school-community programs. They may help illustrate talks to civic groups, bring an eye-catching "extra" to displays in bank lobbies, or carry your message effectively at community events. Also, don't forget posters and exhibits. If there is a vacant store front on Main Street, the owner may be happy to let you perk up the looks of the place with a display.

Annual Reports -- Regular reports detailing the school programs might be placed in the public library, in medical offices, or wherever people wait. Almost invariably, they will pick up available reading material to make the waiting time go faster.

Mail Stuffers -- Small, well-written, attractive brochures or folders may be stuffed in direct mailings sent out by utility companies and banks.

Bulletin Boards -- A well-located bulletin board which is attractive and kept up-to-date with new information will literally stop people in their tracks to look and read. The secret: new and different topics of concern and interest.

Student Pages -- If the local newspaper turns over a page or two as a student newspaper once a week, this section is widely read and an excellent vehicle for reaching parents and other citizens.

District Newsletter -- A district news letter, published on regular schedule, will help both staff members and patrons keep current with school programs and activities. It need not be printed on expensive paper or

illustrated with color inks. The secret is to keep items short but current, written in succinct style, and printed with clean type on a light colored or white paper.

ESC Newsletter -- Many ESC newsletters feature a single district in each issue. If the district will keep the newsletter editor well-informed on programs and activities, these feature stories can reach a broad audience when the newsletter is posted on bulletin boards or, perhaps, reproduced locally and sent out to parents and other citizens.

## Materials and Resources

A number of excellent books and AV materials which offer backgrounding in community relations are available to school administrators. You may get some up-to-date lists or excellent suggestions from:

Dr. John Wherry, Executive Secretary
Nat'l School Public Relations Assoc.
1801 North Moore Street
Arlington, Virginia 22209

Mr. Dick Smith, Exec. Secy.
Texas School Public Rel. Assoc.
3010 Bayshore Drive
Pasadena, Texas 77502

You will also find help -- and first-hand information on how to work most effectively with your local news media -- if you visit the newspaper editors and radio and television news directors in your area. They will appreciate the fact you came by to get acquainted and that you really want to meet their needs. In many cases, they have children in school and a built-in interest in the district.

If there is a college or university nearby, contact the journalism faculty members or information officers for help and suggestions. This kind of initiative can lead you to helpful people and some good materials. Both are available -- if you seek them out.

Role of the Education Service Center

Each regional education service center is prepared to offer consultative assistance in communication as well as other areas of school district management. This assistance may take the following forms:

(1) Assist school administrators to plan and develop a long-range communications program which will help tell their story to the citizens they serve and, at the same time, gather up-to-date information on what these same citizens think about the district and its program.

(2) Provide assistance in helping school district staff members assigned responsibility for communications to improve their writing, editing, and other skills.

(3) Offer support in research, photography, printing, and related areas.

(4) Share photographs and other materials with districts seeking this kind of help to improve their publications.

Evaluation

A planned evaluation system will provide the kinds of information administrators need to make good management decisions. The following questionnaire may prove helpful in analyzing the district's developing communications program as it pinpoints areas which need more intensive work. This evaluation system is available in more complete form from the National School Public Relations Association. (See Appendix C and D.)

# APPENDIX

The following attachments include examples of workshop materials developed by education service center communicators who participated in this project as well as samples of school district communication policies adopted by boards of trustees both in Texas and out of the state.

Appendix A -- Policy Statements on Communication

Appendix B -- Sample Workshop Format

Appendix C -- Evaluation Purpose

Appendix D -- Evaluation Response

APPENDIX A

**Policy Sample #1 (Alhambra City and High School Districts, Calif.)**

Within the bounds of legal and ethical responsibilities to children, the Board of Education of the Alhambra City and High School Districts has a right and responsibility to inform the public of significant happenings within its schools. It is the position of the Board that the schools belong to the public, and the public is entitled to be well informed about the operations of the school system.

It is further the position of the Board that the school districts operate most successfully with the support of the community and that such support is dependent upon the maintenance of positive public opinion. Opinions are formed on the basis of available information or the lack of it, and it is considered to be important that school activities, methods, and objectives be conveyed to those to whom the board is responsible.

It will be the policy of the Board to maintain a continuing program of internal employee relations and community relations through two-way communications.

The Superintendent shall encourage the creation and implementation of good public relations for enabling the community to make known its desires, and for the Board to make known its plans and actions.

The Superintendent will periodically evaluate the community relations program and advise the Board of recommended modifications and improvements.

It is the responsibility of every employee, certificated and classified, to promote good community relations for the schools and for the educational betterment of the students.

**Policy Sample #2 (Franklin Area School District, Pa.)**

The board of school directors believes that the cause of public education can be promoted, resulting in increased instructional benefits for the pupils, by establishing a policy on educational communications. This belief includes the following principles:

1. Educational communication should be a planned, systematic, two-way process of communication between the educational organization and its internal and external publics.
2. Educational communication should be many faceted and should include a variety of media to efficiently and effectively inform all citizens of the district.
3. Educational communication to be effective must include a planned program with involvement and feedback.
4. Educational communication must be internal as well as external and stress the dissemination of factual, objective and realistic data about the school district.
5. Educational communication must be dynamic and sensitive to change as determined by events and evaluation of the program.

The National School Public Relations Association, which includes as members the vast majority of those persons in the country administering school communications programs, urges that board policy on school communications clearly delegate authority for implementing the policy. NSPRA's complete statement on communications policy is part of its standards for educational public relations programs; it is printed here in full.

1. The educational organization shall commit to writing a clear and concise policy statement with respect to its public relations program.
2. The policy statement shall be approved through formal action by the governing body of the organization, shall be published in its policy manual, and shall be subjected to review by the governing body annually.

## GROUP INSTRUCTIONS

1. Report to assigned group.

2. Appoint a group member to do each of the following:
   a. Conduct the discussion.
   b. Write the presentation on butcher paper.
   c. Make presentation analysis to group.

3. Work for no longer than 50 minutes in completing the assignment. If after reading the directions, you feel that you need clarification, call for the coordinator to come to your group area.

4. At the end of the group work, each group will explain its chart to the other members of the workshop. During the explanation, the entire workshop will have an opportunity to make additions and expansions to your presentation. Plan a 15 minute presentation.

## PUBLICS WHICH ARE COMMUNICATIONS TARGETS

Your group will be planning a program of communication for the public assigned.

The development which has led you to believe that there is a need for a program of communication is:

> Your (select one of the following) building, campus, wing, department, etc. is the first one in the district to knock out walls in the school. This means that your group (and others in the program) is operating in an open area in which team teaching and individualized instruction are being emphasized.

The state of thought and action in which you find each of your publics is as follows:

1. Staff – (fellow staff members who will enter the program next year) The staff has mixed feelings about the change. Some do not agree with the concept; some fear the change; some agree with the concept but don't fully know how to implement the change; some understand the concept and are implementing it; some think that they understand the concept and are implementing it, but are actually using old methods in a new setting. Some of the negative staff members are quite vocal in their feelings and morale is suffering. **Develop a plan to unite your fellow staff members into a team and a positive force in making a successful transition into this new learning concept. Consider also to what extent you should have the non-professional staff included in the plan.**

2. Students – Students are aware of the controversy by overhearing their parents talk and by hearing unguarded comments made by some of the staff members. Some of the students consider the entire idea of open concept teaching as a novelty and a means to play. **Develop a plan which would enable you to communicate to and through this audience.**

3. Parents – Parents are divided in their feelings. Some have moved from areas where they have been in open area teaching – some had good experiences, some bad. Some parents do not trust the goals of the open school and consider the entire setting chaotic. Many do not know the terms associated with the new concept or to what extent it marks a departure from the old way. Many think that the old way is good enough for them and do not understand the need for change. It is obvious that a group has informally organized over coffee to oppose the plan and they are making phone calls in the community. **Develop a plan to communicate to and through these parents.**

4. **Community-In-General** (many non-parents) – Many think the conversion is a useless expense and many businessmen are wondering if the benefits will balance out against funds spent. Most have very distorted opinions about the manner in which an open area teaching situation works and do not understand the basic philosophy. Primarily they seem to fear that the schools will have less control over the students and that there will be no discipline or structure. **Develop a plan to win the support of the community and turn them into a positive force for implementing your plans.**

5. **Administration and Board** – Although the change could not have taken place without administration and board approval, that approval was given with some reservations and cannot succeed without their full backing and advocacy. Both the superintendent and the board members believe that the district must move forward and pilot progressive ideas, but are uneasy about the transition period. They are receiving phone calls and letters which indicate concern, misunderstanding, and sometimes anger on the part of the patrons. Supervisors who work with the teachers have a range of attitudes from the strong advocate to the antagonist. **Develop a plan to communicate to and through this audience.**

**Additional "publics" might be added (taxpayers, non-taxpayers, non-parents, college students, civic groups, etc.)**

| How do you want your public to feel? What do you want them to know, do, and say as a result of your PR efforts? | What should you tell your assigned public regarding this proposal to make them feel (know, do and say) the way you want them to? | What will you use (vehicles, if you please) to communicate your message to your public. (Speeches, flyers, etc.) | List your "plan of action" for utilizing each vehicle. Tell who is responsible for each activity. | List some consequences, both favorable and unfavorable regarding this "plan of action." (By doing this you might reconsider the use of some of the vehicles/some aspect of the "plan of action.") |
|---|---|---|---|---|

# EVALUATION PURPOSES AND METHODS

(Main purpose: To provide relevant information for decision making)

I. To contribute to decisions about program installation
- A. Need
  - 1. Frequency
    - a. Student
    - b. Community
    - c. Other
  - 2. Intensity
    - a. Student
    - b. Community
    - c. Other
- B. Program Conception
  - 1. Appropriateness
  - 2. Quality
  - 3. Priority in face of competing needs
- C. Estimates Cost
  - 1. Cost in terms of manhours
  - 2. Cost in terms of dollars
- D. Operational Feasibility
  - 1. Staff
  - 2. Schedule
  - 3. Data/Information
  - 4. Facilities
- E. Projection of Demand and Support
  - 1. Popular
  - 2. Political/financial
  - 3. Professional

II. To contribute to decisions about program continuation, expansion
- A. Continuing need
  - 1. Frequency
  - 2. Intensity
- B. Global effectiveness in meeting need
  - 1. Short-term
  - 2. Long-term
- C. Minimal negative side-effects
- D. Important positive side-effects
- E. Cost
  - 1. Absolute cost
  - 2. Cost in relation to alternative strategies oriented toward same need
  - 3. Cost in relation to benefits
- F. Demand and support

III. To contribute to decisions about program modifications
- A. Program objectives
  - 1. Validity and utility (in meeting needs)
  - 2. Popular acceptance
  - 3. Professional acceptance
- B. Re-assessment of needs
- C. Possible reorganization of staff

IV. To obtain evidence favoring program to rally support
- A. Popular
- B. Political/financial
- C. Professional

V. To obtain evidence against program to rally opposition
- A. Popular
- B. Political/financial
- C. Professional

VI. To contribute to the understanding of basic processes
- A. Educational
- B. Psychological
- C. Social
- D. Economic
- E. Evaluation (methodology)

# EVALUATION
# RESPONDING TO FEEDBACK

I. Utilize feedback from the publics

A. Reality - inclined to generate communication efforts more from habit or interests

B. Need - should generate communication programs based on needs of school district and community

C. Ignoring feedback

1. More than waste of money and energy
2. May lose bond issues
3. Lessening of confidence in the schools
4. Influencing top administrative decisions by pressure groups
5. Lowering of morale among staff members and students
6. Changes of school personnel and school trustees more frequent
7. Breeding of ill will

II. Possibilities for feedback

A. Informal feedback or personal contact

1. Comments from citizens at informal social affairs
2. Pupil comments
3. Complaints and concerns
4. Home visitation
5. Civic participation

a. Task of collecting and structuring feedback
b. Identification of data from informal sources
    1. Encouraging staff members to relate concerns
    2. Keeping a telephone log
    3. Sharing of interest of students, parents
    4. Soliciting feedback from central administration staff members
    5. Formalizing the reporting of this information

B. More formal feedback

1. PTA organizations
2. Community surveys
3. Opinion polls
4. Special surveys
5. Board of Trustee meetings
6. Media treatment
7. Citizen advisory groups
8. Student advisory groups
9. Visits with administrators
10. Town meetings
11. Personnel interviews
12. Faculty committees

III. Guidelines for helpful feedback

A. Talk in terms of behavior, not people (React to the act, not the person)

B. Talk in terms that describe, not evaluate

C. Talk in terms of the present situation

D. Time feedback carefully

E. Know your own non-verbal feedback messages

IV. An evaluation framework

A. For a special group or committee - each member of the group or committee assess the communication system as to

1. Usefulness

2. Strengths

3. Weaknesses

4. Areas needing improvement

5. Extent to which their information needs have been met

B. Analysis of requests for information and the rejection rate of information - Influence and interest gathered from data indicating the extent to which requests (rejections) were made

C. Perceived needs and documented needs

1. Perception of community as to whether they are receiving enough information about schools
(A random sampling checklist of questions such as: When was the last time you read anything about the schools in the newspaper?)

2. Documented needs (hard data) (Newspaper articles, radio announcements, TV coverage, etc.)

3. Relationship between perceived and what is being done

V. Quality vs. Quantity

A. Difference

B. Need to evaluate quality - not just numbers

C. FSC component activity report and composite report

D. Cummulative report

VI. Sample evaluation questionnaire attached

## EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

| | | YES | NO |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | A clear and concise policy statement governing school district communications has been adopted by the Board of Trustees. | ( ) | ( ) |
| 2. | This statement, which includes the purposes of the program, has been made known to all staff members and is readily available to them. | ( ) | ( ) |
| 3. | Commitment has been demonstrated through allocation of human and financial resources. | ( ) | ( ) |
| 4. | Communications is recognized as a management function of primary importance. | ( ) | ( ) |
| 5. | The team of the communications project is directly responsible to the superintendent. | ( ) | ( ) |
| 6. | Sufficient staff to accomplish the objectives of the district and to cope with problems inherent in a communications program has been assigned. | ( ) | ( ) |
| 7. | A sound and effective system of internal communications is a vital part of the program. | ( ) | ( ) |
| 8. | The communications team contacts designated groups or individuals on a regular basis to gather information. | ( ) | ( ) |
| 9. | The communication team regularly surveys the staff to establish needs and priorities. | ( ) | ( ) |
| 10. | The team solicits feedback from all staff members and utilizes it to modify its operations as necessary. | ( ) | ( ) |
| 11. | Specific individuals and community groups with whom continuous communications are desired have been identified. | ( ) | ( ) |
| 12. | The communication team assures follow-through within the district on specific information requests. | ( ) | ( ) |
| 13. | The communication team monitors the media for unsolicited comments related to the district (news and feature stories, editorials, etc.) | ( ) | ( ) |